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ABSTRACT

The correlation between educational aspiration and educational achievement was investigated in 6 Southern states via a longitudinal study (1965-1972). Approximately 1,200 rural youth, stratified by race, sex, and socioeconomic status, were contacted when sophomores, when seniors, and when 4 years beyond high school graduation. Findings revealed that: (1) the majority of the sample had completed no post-high school training; (2) white youths were more likely than nonwhite youths to have completed academic programs, while nonwhite youths were somewhat less likely to have completed any post-high school training and if they had, it was most often of a technical nature; (3) about 21 percent of the youth from the upper socioeconomic strata had completed college as compared to 10 percent and 8 percent of those from the middle and lower strata; (4) men were somewhat more likely than women to have completed some type of post-high school education, but women were slightly more likely to have attained higher education levels; (5) of the young adults who had not completed post-high school education, only 25 percent were enrolled in an educational program at the time of the interview; (6) high school aspirations far exceeded post-high school achievement (only 23 percent of the respondents had achieved or equaled their goals); and (7) aspirations remained high despite achievement level. (JC)

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Alternative Educational Attainment Mechanisms in Early Adulthood [1/]

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Education, in the sense of formal schooling, is a dominant cultural value in the United States. Americans have placed their "faith in education" as if it possessed a magic all its own (Williams, 1956). Similarly, the belief that youth can attain a rewarding social and economic place in life is deeply embedded. The path or ladder to this upward social mobility and status is through education (Reissman, 1959).

There exists a mutually reinforcing relationship between education and social mobility. Formal schooling provides the knowledge, skills, and legitimation needed for successful mobility outcomes. Sorokin (1959) expresses the interface in this manner:

> In present Western societies, the schools represent one of the most important channels of vertical circulation. This is manifested in hundreds of forms. Without university or college graduation, an individual cannot factually. . . be appointed or obtain any prominent place among the high ranks of government or of many other fields; and, contrariwise, a graduate with a brilliant university record is easily promoted and given a responsible position, regardless of his origin and family. (p. 170)

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One primary feature of a modern industrial society is the degree to which the educational institution functions to train youth for a diversity of occupational roles and to steer them along a variety of alternative educational tracts (Banks, 1968). Demands of an industrial society for highly trained manpower has forced contemporary educational institutions into a more pronounced, although still latent, selective or allocative function. The wide diversity of manpower needs existing in industrial nations and the heavy investment of social resources in education make this allocative function virtually mandatory.

Today, entry into an occupation has become increasingly dependent on formal educational qualifications. Criteria for admission into many occupations are restrictive and involve highly specialized training. Gerth and Mills (1946) have translated Max Weber's description of this phenomenon as the "educational patent." By this Weber meant that only the products of the legitimizing educational system were marketable in an economic sense. The status qualifying mechanism was visualized as the college or university diploma much like lineage had served in previous eras. Emphasis on formal training restrict the variety of legitimate means through which youth may attain different occupations. As employment specialization increases, the primary stratification criterion becomes the amount and type of formal education a youth attains (Circourel and Kitsuse, 1963).

Problem

The increasing role of formal education as the criterion for admission into an occupation and for advancement to higher ranking statuses must be better understood. Although the general impact of education is fairly clear, the specific mechanics of the process for different

categories of youths and young adults is much less obvious. The process for rural youth is perhaps even less well understood. What are the patterns of educational utilization most applicable to rural youth? Attention is given to the variety of vocational and non-professional skills, on the one hand, versus the more academic and professional education most often identified with college or university training.

Traditionally, the early years of adulthood immediately following completion of high school are critical for the use of different educational alternatives. Decisions made at this junction are difficult to reverse or change. Blau and Duncan (1967) state that "education exerts the strongest direct effect on occupational achievements, with the level on which a man starts his career being second," (p. 403). Of course, the level at which entry into an occupation occurs is itself, largely a function of formal training within the educational system.

A period from completion of high school to four years later is the time frame of concern in this report. The early educational attainments of Southern rural youth are analyzed. Besides describing the early educational attainments of these young adults, attention is given to selected personal characteristics of sex, race, and socio-economic status, as well as to the social-psychological factor of aspiration considered both as an orientation goal and as a continuing adult value.

Data

In 1965, a Southern regional youth study involving six states was initiated.*/ Three waves of data were collected through 1972 for a panel of approximately 1,200 nonmetropolitan youth. The first and

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*/ The six states include Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas.

second contacts involved a much larger pool of respondents who were contacted first as sophomores in high school in 1966 or 1967. This was followed by a second wave contact in the same high schools in 1968 or 1969 when the same students were seniors. No attempt was made to locate youth who had left school or were absent from school at either point in time.

The senior sample for whom data was available from both contacts represented the pool of young adults from which a stratified random sample was drawn to form the longitudinal panel. Stratification was by sex and race. Data from the third wave contact was obtained primarily through personal interviews, supplemented by mailed questionnaries and telephone interviews wherever necessary.

Variables

The primary variable in the analysis is educational attainment. Each young adult was asked to indicate the "highest degree or educational program" completed. Attainment levels ranged from high school diploma through 4-year college Bachelor's degree. Higher levels of attainment were found inappropriate at this career stage.

Educational aspiration was another key variable measured at two points in time. One measurement occurred during the senior year in high school when each respondent was asked the question: "If you could have as much schooling as you desired, which of the following would you do?"

_____ Quit school right now
_____ Complete high school
_____ Complete a business, commercial, electronics or other technical program after finishing high school

_____ Graduate from a 2-year junior college
_____ Graduate from a 4-year college or university
_____ Complete additional studies after graduating from a college or university

The second measurement occurred in the same questionnaire with the recording of existing educational attainment. Wording of the question copied exactly that used in previous questionnaires. The only deviation was to introduce additional specificity in the nature of any post-college training desired. Categories used were:

_____ Graduate with a Master's Degree
_____ Graduate with a Professional Degree
_____ Graduate with a Ph.D. Degree

Finally, three descriptive variables of sex, race and socio-economic level were used. Only the latter of these needs specification. The question asked was: "What is the major job held by the main breadwinner in your home?" Occupations were categorized using an adapted version of the Edwards Classification and combined to form three strata: lower (unskilled and semi-skilled labor), middle (craftsmen, foremen and sales and clerical workers) and upper (professionals, managers and farm owners).

Findings

Educational attainment in the restricted time frame of only four years after completion of high school cannot be considered culminated. True, there is a strong tendency for many youth to pursue formal education as a routine 4-year endeavor. Moreover, the cultural norm has been in this direction. However, the majority rural youth in this sample had completed no post high school training of any type within the four year

period, Table 1. High school was still reported as the highest level educational program completed by 63 percent. Approximately 20 percent had completed some type of special training of a technical nature. This was identified primarily with vocational trade school programs. Only six percent had completed a community or junior college two-year degree.

A college education is traditionally visualized as a 4-year program commencing during the fall following high school graduation and terminating with spring graduation. Records of colleges and universities suggest that this seemingly linear progression is not widely achieved, at least according to the sterotyped schedule. These data support such a contention. Only 12 percent of the young adults studied had completed a college program within the 4-year time frame.

Selectivity in the patterns of educational attainment already were quite apparent relative to a number of distinguishing descriptive characteristics. Early educational attainment was selective on both race and socio-economic status, but relatively similar for both sexes aside from rather small variations in traditionally sex-related educational programs.

White youths were more likely than nonwhite youths to have completed academic programs offered by junior colleges and colleges or universities. Conversly, nonwhite youths were somewhat less likely to have completed any post-high training, and when they did, it was more likely to be of a technical type, particularly of the kind offered in the military. These differences are insightful, given the fact that these nonwhite youth represent a fairly select group who have completed high school and who posses rather strong achievement orientations.

Socio-economic status clearly revealed the impact of social selectivity on early educational attainment. About 21 percent of the youth from the upper status level had completed college compared to only 10 and 8 percent of those from middle and lower strata. The difference was not marked in the lowest attainment category where 55 percent of the upper strata youth had completed no post-high school education in contrast to 63 percent of the middle and 66 percent of the lower strata. Greater use of military training and vocational trade programs was made by youth from the middle and lower strata.

Men were somewhat more likely than women to have completed some type of post-high school education; however, women were slightly more likely to have attained higher educational levels within the restricted 4-year time frame. Fourteen percent of the women compared to only 10 percent of the men had completed college. Two types of vocational training programs were highly selective by sex. Military training programs had been completed by 10 percent of the men and 7 percent of the women had completed a business or clerical program. In both cases virtually no members of the opposite sex used that particular mechanism for attaining more education.

Current Educational Status

A pertinent question in reference to educational attainment is the extent to which progress is underway toward completion of some educational program. To determine this, each respondent was asked: "Are you presently attending school?" Slightly less than one quarter of these young adults indicated being enrolled in some sort of educational

program. Of these, the vast majority (68%) were enrolled in a 4-year college program and another 12 percent in post-college, professional programs. A variety of vocational and business programs accounted for another 18 percent with the remaining two percent enrolled in junior college.

The pattern of enrollment or non-enrollment with respect to educational attainment revealed a very high proportion, almost half, had failed to complete any post-high school training and were not enrolled in any program at the time of the interview. Stated another way, only one quarter of those young adults who had not completed any post-high school training were working actively toward completion of some type educational program, Table 2. By comparison, 41 percent of those who had completed college and 39 percent of those who completed junior college, were still enrolled in an educational program.

Predisposing Aspiration

Aspirations as goal orientations were conceived as predispositions to educational behavior. As such they were believed to indicate the tracts or paths which an individual is most apt to follow given sufficient opportunity and personal motivation.

While in high school, the educational aspirations of these respondents were rather high, Table 3. More than half aspired to a college or university degree and about half of this number desired specialized academic or professional training beyond that level. Another quarter of the respondents were oriented toward one of a variety of vocational or business programs.

As young adults, only 23 percent had attained or surpassed the educational goals of their youth. Among these individuals were eight percent who desired no education beyond high school and had merely maintained that level. Very few young people aspiring to non-academic training actually had attained education of a more academic type. Similarly, relatively few persons aspiring to academic education actually attained non-academic training as an alternative course of behavior. It does not appear that these two educational tracts are interchangeable for most youth.

Detailed analysis of the data for selected categories of respondents revealed similar patterns in each instance. Women were slightly more likely than men to have attained or surpassed the educational aspirations identified during their youth (30% versus 27%). Racial differences were even less pronounced with whites only slightly more likely to have attained or surpassed their aspirations than nonwhites. The most distinct difference was found for the socio-economic status variable. Early attainment and aspirations were much more likely to agree, or attainment surpass aspirations for those of the lower and middle strata where the goals originally were not as high. Young adults from upper strata backgrounds, who had the highest aspirations were least likely to have attained these goals (32%, 31% and 21% respectively) during the first 4-years following completion of high school.

Concurrent Aspiration

In aspiration - attainment studies, little attention has been given to the question of what happens to aspirations in adult life as attainment

or lack of attainment occurs. The present panel data affords an opportunity to investigate this question as it relates to educational attainment.

Table 4 presents a matrix cross tabulating five types of educational training describing educational attainment and the concurrent educational aspirations for each young adult. The most prominent feature of the data is the almost universal incongruence between educational aspiration and current educational attainment. Only 10 percent of these respondents held aspirations similar to their attainments. The vast majority aspired to educational goals higher than their current level of attainment. Moreover, the proportion of responses within high aspiration levels was larger for the respondents as adults than it had been as youth four years earlier. The change process appears to be one of goal crystalization and specificity in identifying the kinds of post-graduate degree programs and the requirements for entry into various professional occupations.

Because of the restricted time frame of four years, attainments beyond the college or university level were virtually impossible, although, as has already been shown, some respondents were already enrolled in such programs. Nevertheless, one of the most pronounced impressions obtained from the data is the fact that educational aspirations remained high even among those who have completed no educational programs beyond high school. Certainly, in the shortrun, there is no evidence to indicate that educational aspirations are modified to more closely approach the realized levels of attainment.

Controlling the educational attainment and concurrent young adult educational aspiration matrix for sex, race and socio-economic status

revealed similar low proportions of respondents having equaled or surpassed their current aspirations. Men had a slightly larger proportion in this category than women (12% versus 11%). Racial differences were somewhat larger with whites more likely to have attained education equaling or surpassing their aspirations than nonwhites (13% versus 9%). And, socio-economic status revealed a slight but positive relationship between level of educational attainment and current adult aspiration. The proportion of young adults who had equaled or surpassed their aspirations was nine percent in the lower, 12 percent in the middle and 13 percent in the upper strata.

Comments

Viewed within a context of the central role formal education plays in a modern industrial society, we have focused attention on the early educational attainment of young adults in rural areas of the Southern region. The first years following completion of public school education, as generally identified with the American high school, represent a critical period for social mobility.

In the present research the specific time frame was four years. If traditional expectations concerning post-high school education were applicable, this should have provided a sufficient period of time for a majority of youth to have attained some at least preliminary educational goals in a sequential process. One finding was the questionable relevance of a strictly conceived 4-year time frame. A much smaller proportion of these young adults had completed some form of educational program than was expected. Moreover, very few had completed college during the first four years following high school. Compulsory military service neces-

sitated by the Vietnam War could have been a contributing factor in this for young men; but it does not explain why the same pattern also held for young women.

Perhaps most striking about the data on early educational attainment was the relative homogeneity observed in the patterns of attainment for different categories of young adults. Although some relatively small differences appeared by sex, race and socio-economic status, the basic patterns of attainment were similar. For instance, men and women differed little in terms of the proportions attaining each general level of education, although the type of training attained within a level varied somewhat along sex-role lines. The data revealed further that those young adults who completed academic programs in contrast to vocational, technical, business or similar programs aspired to these levels and the reverse was true of those aspiring to nonacademic programs. It was rare to find individuals shift their educational tract from either a nonacademic or academic orientation. The tracts do not appear to substitute for each other should barriers to attainment be encountered or unanticipated opportunities develop.

Consideration of aspirations, both as an antecedent condition to educational attainment and as a concurrently existing attitude, afforded new insight into the nature of aspirations. There was little observed indication that educational aspirations were reduced to lower goal levels during early adulthood. Even young people who had attained no education program tended to maintain rather high aspirations. In fact, there was some trend toward higher overall aspiration levels. Apparently this was the result of greater specificity at the higher goal levels as greater

awareness of educational requirements for various occupations increased. We identified this phenomenon as an example of goal crystalization.

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TABLE 1

Percentage of Southern Rural Youth Panel Achieving Different Levels of Educational Attainment by Sex, Race and Socio-Economic Status

Educational Attainment	All Youth	Sex		Race		Socio-Economic Status*		
		Males	Females	Whites	Nonwhites	Lower	Middle	Upper
	-Percent-							
High School	62.8	61.4	64.7	59.9	66.9	66.2	63.1	55.5
Military	5.6	9.8	----	3.8	8.1	7.4	5.5	3.7
Vocational Technological School	10.2	11.1	9.0	9.8	10.7	10.9	11.6	7.8
Business or Clerical	3.6	0.7	7.4	3.7	3.6	4.4	2.6	4.0
Practical Nursing	0.6	0.2	1.1	0.4	0.8	----	0.6	1.1
Jr. College	5.7	6.8	4.2	7.2	3.6	3.5	7.0	7.0
College	11.5	10.0	13.6	15.2	6.3	7.6	9.6	20.9
Total Number	(1215)	(691)	(524)	(711)	(504)	(367)	(344)	(373)

*There were 131 respondents for whom SES could not be computed

TABLE 2

Educational Attainment Compared with Whether Young Adults Were Currently Enrolled in an Educational Program

Educational Attainment	Those Enrolled in School*	
	Number	Percent
High School	175	23.1
Military	10	14.7
Vocational Technilogical School	10	8.1
Business or Clerical	4	9.1
Practical Nursing	2	28.6
Jr. College	27	39.1
College	58	41.4
Total	276	22.8

*Based on total number of cases--1209

TABLE 3

Cross Tabulation Matrix of Youth Educational Aspirations as High School Seniors (1968) With Early Adult Educational Attainment Four Years Following Completion of High School (1972)

Educational Attainment	Youth Educational Aspirations					
	High School	Vocational, tech. business, etc.	Junior College	College	Professional	Total
	Percent					
High School	7.8	19.2	5.4	15.7	15.4	63.5
Vocational Technological Business, etc.	1.6	8.6	2.1	5.1	3.0	20.4
Junior College	----	0.5	0.5	2.1	1.9	5.0
College	----	0.7	----	3.6	6.8	11.1
Professional	----	----	----	----	----	----
Total	9.4	29.0	8.0	26.5	27.1	(1060)

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TABLE 4

Cross Tabulation Matrix of Early Adult Educational Attainment Four Years Following Completion of High School (1972) with Adult Educational Aspirations (1972)

Educational Attainment	Adult Educational Aspiration					
	High School	Vocational, tech. business, etc.	Junior College	College	Professional	Total
	Percent					
High School	2.9	18.3	4.0	14.8	23.0	63.0
Vocational Technological Business, etc.	0.4	6.4	1.5	4.6	7.0	19.9
Junior College	---	0.4	0.2	1.5	3.6	5.7
College	----	0.1	----	0.8	10.5	11.4
Professional	----	----	----	----	----	----
Total	3.3	25.2	5.6	21.7	44.1	(2110)